

## **Information Bulletin**

# **Educating Indigenous Girls in Latin America: Closing the Gap**

### **Extending the Benefits of Education**

An estimated 40 million people in Latin America, or 10 percent of the total population, are indigenous, including Mayan peoples in Guatemala and the Quechua and Aymara in Bolivia and Peru. Indigenous people live throughout the region but constitute a majority of the total population in Bolivia and significant minorities in Ecuador, Guatemala, and Peru.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is working with Latin American governments and indigenous leaders to improve the standard of living for all indigenous people. Increasing educational opportunities represents an important contribution toward that goal.

In most Latin American countries, gender parity in education has been achieved for children (United Nations, 1995). The education of indigenous girls, however, lags behind the rate for indigenous boys and still further behind the rate for nonindigenous boys and girls. As a group, indigenous females have the lowest literacy rate in Latin America. Given the documented benefits of girls' education in improving the economic and health status of families, it is important to extend education to girls who have been marginalized for cultural, economic, linguistic, or other reasons.

### **The Challenge**

Low levels of education of indigenous women contribute to high rates of infant and maternal mortality, fertility, and malnutrition, since these health indicators are linked to the level of women's education. For example, 46 percent of children of Bolivian women with no education are chronically malnourished, compared to 14 percent of children of women with a secondary school education (Martin, 1997).

In most countries, substantial differences in education exist between indigenous and nonindigenous children. In Guatemala, indigenous girls complete an average of less than one year of schooling, compared to 1.8 years for indigenous boys. By contrast, nonindigenous girls and boys complete an average of 4.0 and 4.5 years respectively. In Peru, 65 percent of the indigenous female population is illiterate, as opposed to 26 percent of the non-indigenous female population. In Bolivia, where the majority of the population is indigenous and rural, 68.5 percent of rural women are illiterate, double the rate for rural men.

## **The Barriers**

Latin American governments, working to include indigenous girls in the educational system, face barriers related to policies, infrastructure, community, household beliefs and practices, and the education system itself (Clay, Tietjen, and Padgett, 1996). For example, indigenous people often live in geographically isolated areas, with schools located a considerable distance away. Many indigenous people, particularly women, have little or no command of Spanish, the dominant language used in most schools in Latin America. Approximately fifteen indigenous languages in Guatemala, twenty-seven in Peru, and seven in Bolivia have more than 10,000 speakers each, and many more languages are spoken by smaller numbers of people throughout the region. Another barrier is the cost of schooling, which is often prohibitively expensive for families in poverty. In addition to paying for their daughter's books, clothing, and other costs, parents must factor in the foregone income from the child earning a wage or helping out with household tasks.

## **Creative Solutions**

New initiatives and innovative approaches are breaking down the barriers. Stakeholder mobilization, scholarship programs, multigrade schooling, bilingual education, multicultural materials, and early childhood education programs broadcast on the radio have shown promising, preliminary results.

## **Mobilizing Stakeholders**

USAID's Girls' and Women's Education Initiative, launched in 1996 by First Lady Hilary Rodham Clinton, is active in twelve countries. Its overall goal is to increase girls' primary school completion by 20 percent over five years. In Guatemala, USAID is building on earlier efforts to mobilize public-sector and private-sector decision makers to develop strategies to effectively provide education to indigenous girls and others traditionally underserved by the educational system. In Bolivia and Honduras, the initiative will conduct research on such topics as the effect of women's literacy programs on broader social and economic development.

## **Scholarship Programs**

Guatemala has been a leader in offering scholarships to keep indigenous girls in school. USAID's Basic Education Strengthening (BEST) Project built on earlier efforts to provide scholarships and to evaluate the effect of these scholarships on girls' school dropout rates. When local community workers assisted parents' organizations in providing scholarships for girls, the first grade promotion rates for scholarship recipients were at least 20 percentage points higher than for non-scholarship recipients over a three-year period. In 1996, for example, 87.5 percent of the girls in the scholarship program went on to second grade, as compared to 61.9 percent of a control group of girls who did not receive scholarships.

As a sign of national commitment to the value of the scholarships, the Guatemalan government developed its own girls' scholarship program, financed with its own resources. In addition, the Ministry target more financial resources toward the scholarships rather than toward program administration.

### **Multigrade Schooling**

The Nueva Escuela Unitaria (NEU) has been an effort by the Guatemalan government to improve educational quality for children attending isolated rural schools where one or two teachers are responsible for all six primary grades. The NEU program, which USAID has helped support, stresses the role of the teacher as a facilitator of knowledge-building who encourages girls and boys to be active, creative, participative, and responsible. The program involves in-service training in which teachers develop materials and form "teaching circles"; parental involvement in classrooms and on school governing boards; active learning strategies such as self-instructional guides, small group work and peer teaching; flexible promotion and participation of students in elected school government.

The program began with 100 schools in 1993 and has since expanded to more than 1,000 schools. From 1993 to 1996, dropout rates were consistently lower in NEU schools than in similar schools without the NEU program. The program has had the greatest impact on indigenous girls; dropout rates were significantly lower for NEU indigenous female students in all three years of investigation (Chesterfield, 1997).

### **Bilingual Education and Multicultural Materials**

After years of using a Spanish-only curriculum to teach indigenous children, Bolivia has introduced bilingual teaching in the classroom. The 1994 Education Reform Law recognizes that bilingual education for the country's indigenous groups can result in educational advancement and economic development on individual and national levels. Funded by the Inter-American Bank and The World Bank, implementation of the reform recently began and has included training bilingual education specialists and producing materials in Quechua, Aymara, and Guarani. The Reform Law also guarantees, at least at the policy level, equal rights for men and women and the incorporation of gender equity throughout the curriculum design process (Martin, 1997).

Since the early 1980s, USAID has supported the Guatemalan government's efforts to provide bilingual education to indigenous girls and boys. Research conducted through the BEST Project showed that girls in the bilingual education program had a higher sixth-grade completion rate than girls in rural schools without the bilingual curriculum (Chesterfield, 1997).

USAID has also provided funding and technical assistance to produce posters, books, songs, and literature in Spanish and in the major Mayan languages to support girls' school participation. These materials encourage indigenous girls to attend school at least until the sixth grade, and they highlight the lives of several Mayan women as positive, culturally sensitive role models for young girls.

## **Early Childhood Interventions and Distance Learning**

Early childhood interventions can play a key role in the transition between home and school for rural and indigenous children. With USAID funding and technical assistance, the LearnTech Project in Bolivia developed a series of radio programs for caregivers and preschool children that were designed to be used at *pidis*, the small centers often located in a woman's home, that serve as gathering places for other women in the community. In addition to its focus on education for preschool indigenous children, the radio programs surmounted the obstacle of distance in reaching indigenous women in rural areas. UNICEF and PLAN International translated the materials into the languages of Aymara and Quechua, which expanded the listenership to non-Spanish-speaking women. Evaluations have shown that the program was effective at helping women set up stimulating environments for their children's early learning and growth (Education Development Center, 1995).

## **Sharing Strategies**

Indigenous girls in each country in Latin America face specific individual and structural barriers to achieving an education. However, governments, NGOs, and others are sharing successful strategies and promising research results. At the April 1998 Summit of the Americas, policy makers from throughout the hemisphere will consider education, including education for indigenous girls and other underserved populations, as one of four major initiatives to contribute to progress toward national social and economic goals.

In May 1998, USAID--supported by the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, European Union, UNICEF, and the Lewis T. Preston Education Program for Girls--will convene an international conference on girls' education. Its goal is to strengthen public-sector, private-sector, and civil society partnerships to increase girls' school participation worldwide. Latin American government, private-sector, and religious leaders will focus on strategies to extend the benefits of education to indigenous girls.

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